Perspective on PCBs

The discovery of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in fish from the Baltic Sea attracted widespread attention among scientists. Prior to that event in 1966 the many formulations of PCBs—some 210 isomers are theoretically possible—were thought to be used largely in controlled or closed systems. That they were present in fish, and were later discovered in birds, added to the concern since the inevitable last link in the food chain was man himself.

Concerns were heightened even further by the knowledge that one of the primary characteristics which made PCBs so useful during the past 40 years was their extreme stability under a variety of circumstances. Furthermore, their structural resemblance to the persistent organo-chlorine pesticides raised other questions about whether all of our worries over these pesticides were accurate or whether, as some suspected, PCBs were the real cause of that concern.

Alert epidemiologists and other scientists in Japan confirmed our expectations of the worst in 1969 with their startling discovery and description of Yusho, a human disease caused by consumption of large quantities of PCB-contaminated rice oil.

A glance at the table of contents for the first issue of ***Environmental Health Perspectives*** gives the reader some idea about the quantity of research being done to specify the extent of the PCBs story. Furthermore, while the spectrum of work presented is comprehensive, it is neither all-inclusive nor definitive. Rather, our hope is that this volume will contribute a new perspective to the study of PCBs and will help as well to engender a renewed vigilance about other "inert" chemicals which are so pervasive a part of the environment of man.

The reports which follow were originally prepared for a Conference on PCBs, sponsored by NIEHS at the request of an Interdepartmental Task Force on the subject. The Conference was held at the Quail Roost Conference Center in Rougemont, North Carolina, on December 20–21, 1971. The papers presented at that meeting appear here substantially as they were presented. Your comments on them are indeed welcome.